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Salvadoran: Cuba runs rebel war

Managua is supplier,
ex-guerrilla chief says

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WASHINGTON — A former Salvadoran guerrilla commander who defected to the United States says Cuba has played a direct role in advising the insurgents and that Nicaragua has supplied most of the rebels' weapons and ammunition and serves as their command and control headquarters.

Arquimedes Canada, whose guerrilla alias was Comandante Alejandro Montenegro, said that during his time with the rebels, he met twice with Cuban military advisers, once in Havana, where the advisers suggested tactics, and once in Managua, where one adviser, an "attractive blond" woman, reprimanded him for not blowing up enough telephone lines.

"The Cubans direct the war and Nicaragua is the staging area for it," Canada, 29, said.

Canada, or Montenegro as he still prefers to be called, led the so-called *Frente Central* or central column of rebels who operated in the early 1980s around San Salvador, the Salvadoran capital, and other cities in the central section of the country.

On Jan. 27, 1982, Montenegro organized and staged the attack on the Salvadoran air force base of Ilopango in the capital in which a dozen government aircraft were destroyed or damaged. He said the special insurgent commando team he led had been trained in Cuba specifically for that action.

The Salvadoran broke with the insurgent leadership and defected to the United States after being captured in Honduras Aug. 22, 1982, while en route to Nicaragua. Although Montenegro refused to say where he lives, it is understood that he has received political asylum in the United States. He said the Salvadoran guerrilla movement has sentenced him to death.

Initially, Montenegro surfaced in Washington in early 1983 to announce his defection. At the time he did not discuss in detail

the role of Cuba or Nicaragua in the Salvadoran guerrilla effort. Now the Reagan administration is again making him available to the press in an effort to bolster its claims that Nicaragua supplies the Salvadoran guerrillas with weapons and ammunition.

This effort is particularly significant now in light of allegations made to Congress in June by David MacMichael, a former CIA analyst, who charged that the administration claim was not true.

"The whole picture that the administration has presented of Salvadoran insurgent operations being planned, directed and supplied from Nicaragua is simply not true," MacMichael said in an interview June 11.

However, MacMichael — like the administration — declined to provide documents or tangible evidence to sustain his allegations.

In an interview in Washington this week, Montenegro said Nicaragua supplies the weapons and ammunition to the rebels while Cuban military and security advisers provide the strategic and tactical direction of the war. He said he traveled to Cuba and Nicaragua in 1981 to receive instructions from the Cubans.

Misleading statement

This is a direct contradiction of what Montenegro, before defecting, told a small group of U.S. journalists who visited a rebel stronghold near El Salvador's Guazapa volcano in February 1982. He said then that the majority of the weapons were captured from government soldiers killed or wounded in battle, bought on the black market or purchased directly from corrupt Salvadoran military officers.

In the interview in Washington, Montenegro said he made the earlier statement on orders from his superiors in an effort to mislead the press.

But in the interview this week, Montenegro also made other assertions that contradicted or differed, albeit slightly, from administration information.

For example, Montenegro said the weapons and ammunition arrived from Nicaragua in trucks. But he acknowledged that this is what he had heard from other guerrilla commanders and that he never personally saw the trucks or directly received weapons from Nicaragua. Initially, he said 99.9 percent of the weapons came from Nicaragua but later changed the figure to 90 percent.

As for the Ilopango air base attack, Montenegro said the strike team consisted of seven men who had been trained in Cuba for six months. But a May 1983 administration document on Central America, based on a CIA debriefing of Montenegro, quoted him as saying that he led an eight-man team that was trained in Cuba for five months.

Montenegro said he believed Cubans had thought up the idea for the Ilopango raid, but that it was guerrilla leader Joaquin Villalobos who directed him to set it up logistically, organizing infiltration of the sapper team and its escape. Villalobos put the team, already trained and ready, under Montenegro's command, Montenegro said.

His reasons

Montenegro said he defected to protest the Cuban and Nicaraguan role in the Salvadoran guerrilla effort, which he felt should be a purely nationalistic enterprise.

"I quit the guerrilla movement in El Salvador because of the foreign interference," said Montenegro, a short and stocky chain smoker with black hair and dark complexion who constantly strokes his thin moustache.

To support his statements, Montenegro described his dealings with Cubans and Nicaraguans when he served as a guerrilla leader. He said that in early July 1981, Villalobos, who is the rebels' most powerful military leader, ordered him and other field commanders to travel to Nicaragua to discuss "military coordination."

Once in Managua, Montenegro said, Villalobos informed him and the other commanders — whom he identified as Jorge Melendez, Juan Ramon Medrano and Miguel Ramirez — that they were to travel to Cuba for talks with Cuban officials about the war in El Salvador. One day after arriving in Managua, he said, he, Villalobos and the others flew to Havana aboard a Cubana Airlines aircraft.

Upon arrival at Jose Marti International Airport, Montenegro said, a Cuban official transported them to a complex of villas and bungalows known as Protocolo — an area reserved for visiting foreign dignitaries.

Montenegro said the Salvadorans stayed there for 3½ days and met several times with Cuban officials. He said four Cubans, including a woman, participated in the conversations.

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"The Cubans first asked us to give them reports, from each field commander, on how we were fighting the war, how many troops we had under our command and what our plans and tactics were," said Montenegro.

"After listening," he added, "then the Cubans gave us instructions on what to do. They told me that my central front guerrillas should concentrate on blowing up telephone and electricity lines and attack city buses and create a mobile strike force around San Salvador."

He said those instructions came from the Cuban woman, whom he described as "very attractive and blond." He said she did not give her name but identified herself as a "communications interception specialist."

Montenegro said he recalled that another Cuban, whom he identified only as Gimeno, insisted that the Salvadoran rebels had to increase their activities around San Salvador in an effort to attract international attention to the armed struggle.

"Gimeno stressed that the war in the mountains was important but that it was hard to report for the international press and that therefore the war had to be brought to the cities in order to create international interest," Montenegro said.

More attacks

On the last day of the Salvadorans' stay in Havana, Montenegro said, the Cubans took them to a shooting range outside the Cuban capital not so much for training but as entertainment. "We wanted to tour Havana, but the Cubans refused to take us around, and so to pacify us they took us to the shooting range," he said.

On returning to the battlefield, Montenegro said, he attempted to implement the Cuban advice by increasing his attacks on telephone and electricity lines.

Three months after the Cuba visit, in October 1981, Montenegro said, Villalobos again ordered him

and other guerrilla field commanders to Managua for yet another series of sessions with the Cubans, this time not in Havana but in the Nicaraguan capital. He said the same four Cubans they had seen in Havana, including the blond woman, turned up in Managua in a house he identified as the Salvadoran guerrilla command and control center.

Montenegro said the woman reprimanded him for not blowing up enough telephone lines. "She told me that I had not done a proper job," Montenegro said, smiling. "She said 'You have not dynamited all the necessary telephone exchanges because we have been monitoring communications in San Salvador and we can still hear the army using telephones.'"